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ABSTRACT

From the very beginning of "Adam Bede," the idea of sight or perception is emphasized. Indeed by reference to a quotation from Wordsworth, George Eliot announces the purpose of the novel: to reveal clearly, to remove from the shade. While most of the characters in "Adam Bede" do not perceive events clearly and must have their erroneous opinions cast into the searching light of truth, Adam in particular must learn to see and to forgive as his perception of Hetty, Arthur, and himself is forever altered. When the reader/student first sees Adam, the impression is left that Adam believes he sees things just as they really are. While quite early in the novel, Adam recognizes that his attitude towards his father is faulty, his attitudes toward other people are more problematic. When Adam finds Hetty in the garden at Hall Farm, he misreads her, interpreting her actions in light of his own interest in her. Similarly he misinterprets the relationship between Arthur and Hetty. Through the novel, Adam is led, through a series of painful adjustments, toward a mature perception of Hetty and Arthur. While it is clear at the end of the novel that Adam still has much to learn about human relationships, as can be seen by his courtship of Dinah, it is clear that he has made major progress. Literature instructors may find this reading of "Adam Bede" helpful in their teaching of the novel. (TB)

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Dr. Max Loges

The Changing Perceptions in *Adam Bede*

From the very beginning of *Adam Bede*, the idea of sight or perception is emphasized. In fact, Eliot prefaces her work with a quotation from Wordsworth which refers to clarity of sight:

> So that ye may have
> Clear images before your gladdened eyes
> Of nature's unambitious underwood
> And flowers that prosper in the shade.
> And when I speak of such among the flock as swerved
> Or fell, those only shall be singled out
> Upon whose lapse or error, something more
> Than Brotherly forgiveness may attend.

By means of this quote, she announces the purpose of her novel: to reveal clearly, to remove from the shade, to provoke brotherly kindness. While most of the characters in *Adam Bede* do not perceive events clearly and must have their erroneous opinions cast into the searching light of truth, Adam in particular must learn to see and to forgive as his perception of Hetty, Arthur, and himself is forever altered.

When we first see Adam, the impression is left that Adam believes he sees things just as they really are. The narrator calls attention to the "keen glance of the dark eyes that shone from under strongly marked, prominent and mobile eyebrows" (6). The first chapter's emphasis is on seeing, on different ways "of looking at things" and especially on the way Adam views them.

Adam's bases of perception is largely founded on a sense of duty and rightness which is akin to the spirit of the Old Testament law.

This is reflected in the song he sings, which is a call for obedience, not a plea for mercy:

> Awake my soul, and with the sun
> Thy daily stage of duty run;
> Shake off dull sloth . . .

Bartle Massey recognizes this legalistic trait in Adam when he warns him, "you're over-hasty and proud and apt to set your teeth against folks that don't square to your notions" (208). Reva Stump notes that: "Adam measures the weakness of others against his own strength, and his judgment is sometimes harsh" (10). This measuring can first be seen when he chides his fellow workers for putting away their tools the minute the clock strikes as if they were afraid of doing a stroke too much.

Adam's weighing people in the balance and finding them wanting becomes more apparent when he returns home and discovers that his father has not returned home from an early visit to the pub to finish the coffin which had been promised. Adam condemns his father when he says: "I'd work my right hand off sooner than deceive people with lies i' that way. It makes me mad to think on't. I shall overrun these doings before long. I've stood enough of 'em" (36). Jones points out that Adam's attitude that he is righteous and that righteousness is within every man's reach is a flaw in his character and must be overcome (9).

Adam's range of perception and growth of sensibility begins with the death of his father. He laments his harsh attitude at the graveside.

> Ah, I was always too hard, . . . it's a sore fault in me as
> I'm so hot and out of patience with people when they do
> wrong, and my heart get shut up against 'em, so as I can't

bring myself to forgive 'em. I see clear enough the's more pride than love in my soul, for I could sooner make a thousand strokes with the' hammer for my father than to bring myself to say a kind word to him. . . . Maybe the best thing I ever did in my life was only doing what was easiest for myself. It's always been easier for me to work nor to sit still, but the real tough job for me 'ud be to master my own will and temper and go right against my own pride. It seems to me now that if I was to find father at home tonight, I should behave different; but there's no knowing - perhaps nothing 'ud be a lesson to us if it didn't come too late. (172).

Although Adam realizes that his attitude towards his father was faulty, his growth in character has not yet allowed him to see the flaws in his other relationships. In most cases Adam relies heavily upon his math and square for direction, but in his relationship with Hetty, his heart replaces his mind as the seat of logic. In Chapter XIX, we find Adam walking along seeing in his heart, "Hetty in a sunshine with slanting rays that tremble between the delicate shadows of the leaves" (177). While Adam ponders this scene, he incorrectly interprets the touch of melancholy kindness that he saw in her face at his father's funeral as a sign that she had some sympathy with his family trouble. He envisions Hetty as a bright-cheeked apple hanging over the orchard wall (178). As Adam thinks, he is not quite sure if she loves him, but there is certainly no doubt that he loves her.

In the following chapter when Adam visits the Hall Farm, he finds Hetty in the garden picking currants. Adam again misinterprets a physical reaction, this time a deep red blush. As they gather the

currants, "Adam's heart was too full to speak, for he thought Hetty knew all that was in it." He feels that, "She was not indifferent to his presence after all; she had blushed when she saw him, and then there was that touch of sadness about her which must surely mean love since it was the opposite of her usual nature, which had often impressed as indifference" (187).

It is apparent that Adam assumes too much. He believes what he wants to believe and tries to make every movement, no matter how inconsequential, support his belief. He never considers that all these physical reactions may mean something other than what he thinks, and he does not take into account that her silence could well be interpreted as indifference to his presence. Adam continues his ceaseless admiration for Hetty even though at no time does she overtly indicate in any way that she is romantically interested in him. He refuses to heed his mother's warnings about Hetty even when he sees her needless pouting at the birthday dinner. Adam is so caught up with his version of the "ideal" Hetty that he has created in his heart that he will not believe what his mind tells him when he discovers her expensive locket. He puts his own interpretation on her change in complexion as a sign that she was ashamed of loving finery knowing that he disapproved of it rather than acknowledging the obvious fact that she was hiding an expensive gift from a secret lover. To Adam, Hetty's reaction was a proof that she cared about what he liked and disliked. The narrator says that: "He went to bed that night comforted, having woven for himself an ingenious web of probabilities - the surest thing a wise man can place between himself and the truth" (244).

Like his perception of Hetty, Adam's perception of Arthur is also faulty, but at least it appears to be rooted in firmer ground. Adam, who is several years older than Arthur, has known him for several years and appears to have been his friend and tutor in practical affairs (54). Arthur has immense respect for Adam and dreams of making him his grand vizier after he inherits his grandfather's estate. We first see the two together when they meet on a road in Chapter XIV. Adam thinks that:

> Next to his own brother Seth, Adam would have done more for Arthur Donnithorne than any other young man in the world. There was hardly anything he would not rather had lost than the two foot ruler which he always carried in his pocket, it was Arthur's present, bought with his pocket money when he was a fair-haired lad of eleven . . . Adam had quite a pride in the little squire in those early days, and the feeling had only slightly modified as the lad had grown into the whiskered young man. (139)

Adam also praises Arthur when he gives his speech at the birthday dinner. "I'd wish for no better lot than to work under him, and to know that while I was getting my own bread I was taking care of his interests. For I believe he's one o' those gentlemen as wishes to do the right thing, and to leave the world a little better than he found it" (228). The narrator explains that part of Adam's admiration comes from the fact that he was very susceptible to the influence of rank, and was quite ready to give an extra amount of respect to everyone who had more advantages than he had, supposing that the advantages made them better individuals and thus deserving of the added respect.

Adam's way of looking at things receives another sudden jolt as he is forced to reevaluate these relationships. While Adam is walking towards the grove to face this crisis, he ironically is thinking affectionately of Arthur's good qualities. Here his daydream of seeing Hetty in the sunshine beneath the leaves is realized, but here, unlike his dream, she is in the arms of Arthur. Suddenly, Adam's foggy perception clears, "He understood it all now - the locket, and everything else that had been doubtful to him: a terrible scorching light showed him the hidden letters that changed the meaning of the past" (251). But even in this light he only sees part of the truth, for Adam refuses to believe that Hetty's part in the affair is active. To Adam she is the innocent victim. Unfortunately Adam's growth in perception is always marked by two steps forward and one step back.

When Arthur approaches him, he discovers a new Adam Bede who accuses him of his wrong and tells him, "Instead of acting like the upright, honourable man we've all believed you to be, you've been acting the part of a selfish light-minded scoundrel . . . though it cuts me to the heart to say so, and I'd rather ha' lost my right hand" (252). Arthur admits that perhaps Adam is right and tries to shrug off the matter. Adam, however, no longer awed by the influence of rank in a person who he feels does not deserve, presses the issue with Arthur to the point of violence.

> Nay, sir, things don't be level between Hetty and you. You're acting with you eyes open, whatever you may do; but how do you know what's been in her mind? She's all but a child - as any man with a conscience in him ought to feel bound to take care on.

And whatever you may think, I know you've disturbed her mind. (260)

Adam then insists that Arthur write a letter to Hetty setting matters straight.

As weeks pass after the delivery of the letter, Adam notices changes in Hetty. These changes again lead him to certain erroneous interpretations that will prolong and intensify his suffering. She always looks pleased to see him, "turning up her lovely face towards as if she meant him to understand that she was glad for him to come" (296). Because he notices no sadness in her, Adam feels that her affair with Arthur might not have been as serious as he first thought. The narrator describes this promise of happiness as having an intoxicating effect on Adam and once again sets him thinking on the prospect of marriage. When the proposal does come, the couple is surrounded by nature, and Adam is in such an excited state he scarcely feels that he was walking.

The dream soon dies, however, as the truth comes out. In this third phase of Adam's growth in perception, all deceit and half-truths are stripped, away, and Adam is forced to look upon the facts just as they are. Barbara Hardy notes, "This crisis, like his father's death, forces him to self-assessment; the tragic suffering is an imaginative step in human sympathy, a genuine catharsis within the tragic hero" (12).

When Adam is informed by Mr. Irwine of Hetty's arrest and the strong presumption of her guilt, his reaction is to deny it. However, having been under stress for sometime, Adam is no longer sure of seeing anything "pretty clear." Instead, he is becoming aware of the alarming, but at the same time consoling, complexity of human morals

and motives. A sign of his own uncertainty and is his first step toward seeing clearly is that instead of trusting his own judgment, he tells Mr. Irwine, "I'll do what you think right" (344).

Throughout the rest of the novel, Adam is lead to a final mature perception of Hetty and Arthur by Bartle Massey and Mr. Irwine, whose visions have not been so blurred. During the first few days of waiting at Stonition, Adam shrank from seeing Hetty. He is mostly concerned that Arthur be exposed and that one and all come to know his measure of guilt. When Mr. Irwine informs Adam of Hetty's strange withdrawn state, Adam's sense of justice is outraged, and he considers doing physical violence to Arthur. The process of changing Adam's perception of Arthur and Hetty begins here Mr. Irwine's attempt to calm Adam's resentment. He tells him:

> Adam, he [Arthur] will suffer, long and bitterly. He has a heart and a conscience . . . I am sure he didn't fall under temptation without a struggle. He may be weak, but he is not callous, not coldly selfish. I am persuaded that this will be a shock of which he will feel the effect all his life. (354)

Adam is not easily swayed by Irwine's words, so Irwine continues:

> It is not for us men to apportion the share of moral guilt and retribution. We find it impossible to avoid mistakes even in determining who has committed a single criminal act, and the problem of how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequence of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it" (354).

Through this experience, Adam's bases of perception is transformed from the legalism associated with the Old Testament to a

doctrine of mercy and forgiveness that is akin to the New Testament. This transformation is three-fold and couched in religious imagery. Bartle Massy, who has experienced similar sorrows, assumes an extremely important function during this time through which Adam's vision is enlarged. The first stage is a sense of hopelessness. Very early on the morning of the trial, Adam sits alone in an upper room in a state in which the narrator describes in detail:

> Deep unspeakable suffering may well be called a *baptism*, a *regeneration* the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret . . . made Adam look on all the previous years as it they had been a deem sleepy existence, and he had only now awakened to full consciousness. It seemed to him as if he had always before thought it a light thing that men should suffer; as if all that he had himself endured and called sorrow before was only a moment's stroke that had never left a bruise. Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and pity (my italics). (357)

At this point Adam is so immersed in his sorrows that he sees no way of emerging from them. Reva Stump points out, "With the explicit state of the religious imagery here, the symbolic import of the upper room begins to suggest itself. Adam's time of meditation in the upper room has brought him to the point of conversion" . . . .(48). The second stage occurs in a scene where Bartle Massey helps Adam by encouraging him to obtain his redemption by participating in a type of communion in the upper room. "I must see to your having a bit of the loaf and some of that wine Mr. Irwine sent this morning. He'll be angry

with me if you don't have it" (398). Adam first gently pushes the cup away. He then begins to question Massey about Hetty's plight at the trial, and as his thoughts are turned towards her, Adam begins to partake of the sacramental meal. Through this act, Adam symbolically completes his conversion to a new way of perceiving. Soon thereafter, he is described as looking more like the Adam Bede of former days; also, it is at this time he decides to go into court with Hetty declaring, "We hand folks over to God's mercy and show none ourselves. I used to be hard sometimes: I'll never be hard again" (360). His changed attitude reflects a changed perception of Hetty. Adam accepts her guilt and along with it the fact that he can never have her. The love he now has for her is the love of one soul reaching out to another in time of need, a love that wants to help, a love that wants to comfort with no thought or hope that it shall ever be returned.

Adam's initiation into his new state of awareness also transforms his attitude towards Arthur. They meet again by accident soon after the trial. Adam, who still feels some resentment towards Arthur, sees that he has been touched with the signs of suffering. Arthur invites Adam to the Hermitage to talk, and while they are there, he informs Adam of his intention to go into the army. Arthur pleads with Adam to remain at his post and to convince the Poysers to remain at the Hall Farm. He tells Adam that he too loved Hetty and that his suffering in a sense has been greater than Adam's, for he was the cause of all the misfortune. Adam is moved by Arthur's confession and confirms the commitment he made in the upper room by taking Arthur's hand and saying, "I've no right to be hard towards them as have done wrong and repented" (392).

While it is true that Adam still has much to learn about human relationships, as can be seen in his courtship of Dinah, it is clear that he has made major progress. Adam can feel no "narrow sighted joy" because past wrongs have given him a "sense of enlarged being" towards which his whole life is moving. His love for Dinah which is an outgrowth of his fuller life, provides him with a new strength. In this strength, he can say:

> I shall look to her [Dinah] to help me to see things right. I've always been thinking I knew better than them as belonged to me, and that's a poor sort o' life when you can't look to them nearest to you t' help you with a bit better thought than what you've got inside you a'ready. (442-443)

From absolute confidence in himself to the realization that he needs others' insight, Adam Bede has certainly come a long way.

For today's readers and students, the 19th century novelists who belong to the literary canon can be examined again so that we may add to the body of knowledge about their masterworks. In the case of George Eliot's "Adam Bede," this involves changing ideas about the protagonist's range of perception and sensitivity.

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